

## CAREER DECISIONMAKING: YOUTH FUTURES IN CONTEXT

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**Introduction**

In order to understand better how young people consider joining the military, we investigated the more general processes by which young people make (or do not make) decisions about their future work or career situations. In-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted over the telephone between December 1995 and May 1996. We interviewed 120 young men who had responded to the YATS survey in the fall of 1995.

The participant pool was selected purposively, based on their responses to the YATS survey. The pool was restricted to 17-21 year-old youth who were high school seniors, graduates, or were in post secondary schools. Within each race/ethnic and propensity group, quotas were set to establish balance in terms of age, educational status, work status, and region of the country. Details of the participant selection process are available in another paper prepared for this conference (Perry, Hintze, & Lehnus, 1996).

The interviews were lengthy, lasting an average of about 45 minutes. Interviewers followed a general protocol, which laid out the topics of interest (i.e., post-high school career plans, military propensity, images of the military, and knowledge about the military). In contrast to the structured YATS interview, these were open-ended and probing. The interviews were aimed at collecting information about the historical unfolding of these young men's career plans. We were interested in the young people's deeper thoughts and feelings, not their "top of mind" reactions.

The interview transcripts were analyzed qualitatively, iteratively identifying and rechecking major themes and patterns, following the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This paper summarizes our main findings related to career decisionmaking. In order to provide the reader with the flavor of the life histories out of which we drew these findings, we intersperse the discussion with brief vignettes that provide concrete illustrations behind our abstract conclusions.

**The Importance of Current Life Contexts to Career Decisionmaking**

The analysis focused on how youth make decisions about their futures and how entering the military might fit into plans for the future. In reading through the interviews, we were struck by the importance of current context to future plans and their decision processes. Young people's approach to deciding about their future careers were almost completely shaped by the basic life circumstances that surround them today. Although a constellation of factors -- including age, race, ethnicity, region of the country, and urbanicity -- influenced the way they thought about the future, the overriding factor in shaping their decision-making styles was *social class*, as represented by their parents' socioeconomic status. A related but separate factor shaping career decision-making approaches was the youth's plans for college attendance.

Depending on their social class and plans for college, the youth appeared to function in very different decision-making contexts. We identified three youth segments, described below.

**Group 1: Privileged college or college-bound youth.** At one extreme is a group comprised of middle- and upper middle-class youth who come from families who take it for granted that the youth will attend college. Many of the parents of these youth are college graduates themselves, and virtually all are reasonably successful at their own professions or businesses. From an early age, these youth were brought up with the premise that college is a minimum prerequisite for future financial stability and professional success.

Surrounded by positive role models, these youth have access to a wealth of informal and formal resources on career options. Their parents usually bear the major burden for financing their education, and it is the youth's "job" to make good on this parental investment. Many parents play an active part in facilitating their children's choices, helping them gather information or obtain valuable experiences related to future careers.

Few of the youth have existing commitments or responsibilities that preclude pursuing advantageous job or educational options. Many of these youth are white, some are Hispanics (including South Americans affluent enough to attend school in the United States), and relatively few are African American.

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**Group 2: Constrained noncollege youth.** At the other extreme are the youth whose life contexts are circumscribed by limited resources, family obligations, strong parochial attachments, and other factors that restrict the content and scope of their choices. Mostly of lower socioeconomic status, this group has limited role models and sources of career information. Their lives are often marked by insecurity brought about by economic crises, unemployment, illness, and death.

Many in this group are geographically rooted. They are reluctant to leave their families, friends, and familiar local settings. Many have lives that do not focus on work or careers, centering their priorities instead on other concerns, such as religion, family, and the outdoor life.

This group is diverse in terms of race/ethnicity, region, and urbanicity. It is comprised of rural and small-town whites, Hispanics, and African Americans. It also includes Hispanic and African American youth in urban settings.

**Group 3: Less privileged striving youth.** In between are youth with lower socioeconomic statuses who work or attend technical schools, community colleges, or branch campuses of state universities. These young men come from working class or lower middle-class families. Many times, they are the first in the family to attend college. Unlike the young men in Group 1, their families cannot provide them with realistic role models because they are reaching beyond the typical mode in their family backgrounds.

Often they work and go to school at the same time, and their jobs may not be related to their educational goals. Many receive financial aid. Occasionally they drop out of school due to financial shortfalls or other life problems.

Demographically, this group resembles Group 2. The group includes rural and small-town whites and Hispanic and African American youth from both rural and urban settings.

### Decision-Making Styles of Each Youth Segment

Our conversations with these young men revealed distinctive decision-making styles that were closely linked to their decision contexts. While the linkages were certainly not perfect, each segment of youth tended to exhibit consistent patterns of decisionmaking or planning for the future.

**Group 1**, composed of relatively affluent middle- or upper middle-class youth, tends to exhibit decision-making approaches described by the "rational decision-making model" (Lieblich, 1989). That is, they gather information related to future careers systematically, resulting in realistic understandings of the academic, experience, and other requirements of various career options. They weigh the strengths and weaknesses of different possibilities in terms of their needs and come to a considered decision on what is most suitable. Once they make up their minds, they take the necessary steps to set the decision in motion.

These young men are able to do so because they enjoy a period labeled by theories of late adolescent and early adult development as a "psychosocial moratorium," a time when the youth is free from major commitments and responsibilities (Marcia, 1987). They are not married, have no children, and generally can afford to live away from their parental homes. Their parents and their parents' friends tend to be in occupational settings that can provide them with realistic previews into the world of work and potential future careers. They generally have not experienced major life traumas that have redefined their lives. They can, therefore, focus their energies on schoolwork and the active exploring and testing of alternative role possibilities.

*Steven, an affluent, white youth, said, "Both of my parents went to college, my sister went to college. My father is quite successful at what he does, and growing up, I saw what college did for him and our family." In looking toward the future, he said, "I hope I can provide for my family the way my father has been able to provide for us. That is one of the thing that pushes me..."*

Not all youth are so fortunate as to enjoy the kind of moratorium discussed by developmental theorists. The young men in **Group 2** live within more circumscribed contexts, characterized by limited resources and other factors that restrict the ability to make choices and decisions. Due to two very different sets of reasons, these youth tend to be **nondecisionmakers**: They will not or cannot actively make decisions about their future careers.

One subgroup of young men among these circumscribed youth are relatively passive in their approach to career choices, following the path of least resistance. Many feel comfortable surrendering their fate to paths laid out by others, whether they are parents, spouses, or perhaps, recruiters. In terms of future careers, they often create their

own constraints, as there is nothing in their current lives to prevent them from pushing toward various career possibilities. Yet there is also nothing to make them push actively toward the future.

*John, a 20 year-old, works at his grandfather's store. He began helping out several years ago after working all through high school at his father's gas station. He is not enchanted with the prospect of spending the rest of his life in this job, but has never lived anywhere else. He acknowledges that there is a "whole big world" out there, but has no idea of how to approach it.*

While they speak of plans for the future, they often talk about contradictory plans and have made no effort to follow up on any of them. They do not engage in careful information seeking and follow-up in investigating career options. Thus it is more accurate to say that these young men have the appearance of plans, but do not have real ones. Many of these youth instead have "pipe dreams," with vague and unrealistic expectations. We have labeled these youth "diffuse decisionmakers."

*Antoine, a 19 year-old, inner-city, African American youth, spoke of going to Duke University and being drafted in the NBA. Antoine did not play on his high school basketball team and is barely getting passing grades in a local school. He has no idea how such a dramatic change in his circumstances might occur.*

Another subgroup is composed of young men who are blocked from making decisions by external events and pressures. Overtaken by events, these youth have been prematurely foreclosed from future decisionmaking. Even at a relatively early age, some have been thrust with adult responsibilities. They may have married early and/or had children. Some bear the burden of supporting seriously ill parents, forced into the role of "the man in the family" in the absence of an adult male. In other cases, as we found with surprising frequency in our interviews, serious health problems at a young age limit what the future holds for young men. Brain tumors, serious overweight, cancer, and high blood pressure have robbed these youth of any real potential to make decisions for the future.

*At 18, life decisions have already been made for Charles, and it is too late to change. "She is the boss now," he says of his bride of 6 months. The couple lives with Charles parents and younger sisters.*

*Le Var is an African American youth who is helping his father raise his 6 year-old nephew since the child's mother passed away. He would like to join his brother who operates a business in Germany, but feels that his father and nephew need his support, and financial help.*

*Ramon returned home when his mother contracted cancer not long after she and his father divorced. He is the eldest son in a female-headed household and has to provide support for his mother and younger siblings.*

Young men in **Group 3** have the same limited socioeconomic background as those in Group 2, but differ from them importantly in their drive to pursue education or career goals. Because they lack the economic security of the more affluent youth and do not have their multiple sources of support, contacts and information, the plans and decision-making processes of Group 3 youth are necessarily more tenuous.

From the outside, the educational and career paths of these youth may appear haphazard or random. Without the luxury of a moratorium period, they have to wend their way through the world, opportunistically responding to the mix of positive and negative circumstances that they encounter. Throughout, they attempt to maintain sight of their long-term objectives, even as they make necessary accommodations that may not necessarily serve to move them closer to their goals. Their activities can take on a "zigzag" look as they respond to setbacks and maneuver for opportunities. Many drop out of school for periods of time while they earn enough money to return.

Yet for these youth, the appearance of randomness is superficial. While their decision processes do not fit the orderly steps of the traditional rational decision-making model, there is underlying rationality in the way they take advantage of opportunities that become available. What may appear to be random acts are often actually the results of flexibility required to adjust to circumstances as they come up.

*Jose had done everything right -- growing up, he achieved high grades in school, got awards for good citizenship, and acquired college scholarships from several sources. In spite of this exemplary effort, financial pressures forced him to decline acceptance at a 4-year state university. He took a day job and attends community college at night. He is still longing to attend a 4-year university to major in electrical engineering.*

Without a secure safety net, the importance of timing and luck to the direction of these young men's lives cannot be overstated. Chance encounters can change lives. Some are fortunate enough to encounter a mentor early on who takes them under wing and exposes them to potential work opportunities. Other physically talented youth receive athletic scholarships, without which they would not be able to attend college.

### The Military's Place in These Career Decision-Making Groups

Decision-making contexts and decision-making styles are interwoven in these young men's consideration of the military. Youth in Group 1, the affluent college bound, rarely seriously consider a military career. These youth foresee futures with a good deal of autonomy and self-direction in their work and often react negatively to the military's hierarchical image. These youth speak of "not being able to take" being "bossed around." A very small number consider joining ROTC or one of the military academies (mostly the Air Force, in our interviews).

Group 2, the nondecisionmakers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, present a mixed opportunity for the military. Clearly, those we have labeled as "foreclosed decisionmakers" are no longer good candidates for enlistment. Their lives have already been determined by events and circumstances that close off the military, as well as other options, to them. The story is different, however, for those we have labeled "diffuse decisionmakers." Approached at the right time, some of these young men (and most of their parents) would be receptive to a structured environment that could help them "shape up" and become more focused and disciplined. Some of the urban inner-city youth see the military as an "escape hatch" from dangerous surroundings fraught with pressures for involvement in illicit activities.

*A 19 year-old, rural, white college dropout now working on a barge on the Mississippi, contacted an Army recruiter immediately after he returned home and took a low-paying job at a local steel mill. He had gotten caught up in partying and socializing in his freshman year and had to drop out of college. If the river barge job had not come through, he would have enlisted.*

*An African American 19 year-old youth is "thinking of trying to get into the military or something like that." His folks are pressuring him to enlist, and he has a "nowhere job" that he cannot survive on. His mother supports the idea of enlistment, to rescue him from hanging out with his friends and the dangers on the street. He is considering either the Marines or the Navy. He is anxious to escape his parents, and "be out on my own... doing my own daily things."*

*Rodney, an African American youth, indicated that he had thought about enlisting when his family moved into a bad neighborhood. "I'd rather go to the military than be one of those hoodlums around here. That's the way I felt at the time..."*

Enlistment also figures into the picture for youth who realize that they are not yet ready for college or prepared to commit to a career path. In some ways, the military might provide these youth with the moratorium that is not available in their current lives--a time and space in which to learn skills and acquire work experiences that will serve them in their future careers.

Many of the military's advertisements are geared toward the young men in Group 3, striving and economically disadvantaged. Over and over in our interviews, we heard reference to many of the attributes that have formed the basis for much of the military's advertising copy in the past few years. For example, for many of these young men, the military presents a rational solution to the lack of money for college.

*One white, 17 year-old high school senior would much prefer to go to college but, with five brothers and sisters at home, is worried about finances. "If I don't got the money to pay, I'll go to the military because of that GI Bill stuff. It ain't going to be no cakewalk."*

Others think of the military as a way to adventure, experience, travel, physical challenge, and greater respect from others. Again, these are all attributes that have been emphasized in many military advertisements.

*An 18 year-old Hispanic high school senior has his sights set on a career as a police officer, following the lead of two uncles who are strong role models. He is also thinking of first enlisting in the Army or Air Force for a few years, mostly to satisfy a need "not to stay in one place."*

For others, the military provides a safety net. Enlistment would be a fallback option if anything should happen to upset their college plans, or if they lose their scholarships. While young men for whom the military is regarded as "employer of last resort" may not be the most attractive targets for recruiting, nevertheless, they represent a

real segment of youth for whom the military can be a future.

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